NASA/The Visible Earth

This satellite view shows the Middle East, where the events of the Old Testament took place.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The history of the Israelite nation developed within a specific geographical context. For this reason the Bible takes geography seriously. It records real events taking place in time and space. The Bible is not a portal into an artificial and contrived Narnia-like literary history. The Bible, however, is not simply a collection of ancient annals, nor is it intended to be a gazetteer or topographical manual. Like the science of archaeology, geography expands our knowledge of the setting or background of the biblical narratives and thus enriches our understanding of a given Old Testament text.

The physical world of the Old Testament was the ancient Near East, commonly known today as the Middle East or sometimes Southwest Asia. The Old Testament narratives encompass the region of Mesopotamia in the east, Asia Minor or Anatolia in the north, Syro-Palestine and Egypt in the west, and the Arabian peninsula in the south. The modern states of Iraq and Iran occupy most of ancient Mesopotamia, while Asia Minor is now known as Turkey, and Saudi Arabia controls most of the Arabian peninsula. Nearly, four-fifths of Old Testament history takes place in the area of Syro-Palestine on the eastern Mediterranean coast. This territory now includes the states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

The Old Testament World

The Fertile Crescent

The world of the Old Testament is usually identified with the "Fertile Crescent." This area included the Nile River valley and delta, the narrow plains along the Mediterranean coast of Syro-Palestine, and the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. Adequate rainfall and irrigation along these coastal plains and river valleys permitted agriculture and settled life, giving rise to the earliest civilizations of the ancient Near East. The first part of this section describes the major geographical regions adjoining this fertile crescent and the respective peoples and cultures influencing Hebrew history.

Mesopotamia

The name Mesopotamia means "the land between the rivers," namely, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The fertile strip of land along the rivers extends some six hundred miles from the mountainous regions on the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent to the expansive **alluvial** plains at the Persian Gulf. Like Egypt, networks of canals irrigated the flood plain, making lower Mesopotamia especially productive agriculturally. Unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia had no natural barriers protecting the region from outside influence and invasion. The city-state cultures of Sumer and Akkad were responsible for spreading early civilization northward along the river basins.

Northern Mesopotamia was the homeland of Israelite origins in that the Hebrew patriarchs lived in the area of Haran in Paddan-Aram between the Tigris and Euphrates. Abraham is identified as an Amorite (Ezek. 16:3), and sometime later Jacob sojourned among Amorite kinfolk in Paddan-Aram (Gen. 28:1–9). We are also told that Abraham migrated from Ur in Mesopotamia (or a "northern Ur" now suggested as an alternative) northward to Haran, and finally to Canaan as he followed the revelation and promise of Yahweh.

Later Israelite history is greatly influenced by the empire nations of Mesopotamia, with the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians all controlling the land of Palestine at some point in their rule of the ancient Near Eastern world. Assyria and Babylonia were also responsible for the destruction of the divided kingdoms of the Hebrews and the deportation of thousands of Hebrews into exile in Mesopotamia. Then, under the enlightened rule of Cyrus and the Persians, these Hebrew exiles were permitted to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple of Yahweh.

Caryn Reeder, courtesy of the British Museum

In ancient times, civilizations often saw their own nation as the center of the world. Ezekiel 5:5 says, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says, 'This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.' " This Babylonian drawing depicts that kind of worldview. One of the oldest known world maps (6th cent, BC), it depicts Babylon roughly in the center, surrounded by other nations and cities.

Asia Minor/Anatolia

The region of Asia Minor situated northwest of the Fertile Crescent is a rugged, mountainous area. It is a diverse land with rich soil and Mediterranean climate in the west and south, a dry and barren central plateau, and steep mountains in the east toward Armenia. The stores of minerals and metal ores in the central mountain ranges afforded the inhabitants of Anatolia a ready resource for commercial trading with the rest of the ancient Near East for food staples and domestic wares. The peninsula was also the land bridge joining central Asia and southeastern Europe, which meant the area was often subject to invasion and foreign encroachment and influence.

During the second millennium BC the central portion of the region was home to the Hittite Empire, a powerful rival to Egypt for control of Syro-Palestine. The Hittites were a military people, hiring out as mercenaries and exporting military technology throughout the ancient Near East. The Hittite treaty form by which Hittite kings subjugated conquered foes became an important literary contribution to the ancient world. This treaty form was similar to that used by the Hebrews for structuring the writing of the covenant between Yahweh and his people Israel in both Exodus (19–24) and Deuteronomy. There are also parallels between certain Hittite laws and the Old Testament, and some biblical scholars even find Hittite influence in the form and practice of history writing in Israel.

The Near East in the Late Bronze Age

During the first millennium BC the people of Urartu dominated eastern Asia Minor and warred with the Assyrians for control of northern Mesopotamia. The Lydians controlled western Asia Minor during the Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 685–546 BC).

Syro-Palestine

The region of Syro-Palestine, or the **Levant**, constitutes the land bridge between the continents of Africa and Asia. This four-hundred-mile strip of fertile land along the Mediterranean coast was bounded on the west by the Great Sea and in the east by the Arabian desert and the deep gorge of the Jordan cleft. Syro-Phoenicia, or the northern portion of this land bridge, essentially encompasses the modern states of Syria and Lebanon. Palestine, or the southern portion of the land bridge, essentially includes the modern states of Israel and part of Jordan. Generally Mount Hermon marked the boundary between the northern and southern portions of the land bridge. (The physical and geographical features of Syro-Palestine are described later in the section.)

The coast of Syro-Phoenicia had the advantage of natural harbors. This gave rise to extensive maritime commerce centered in the region, especially among the Phoenicians and their key ports of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos. The Phoenicians occupied the northern coast of Palestine from Acco to Ugarit and were merchant traders all along the Mediterranean seaboard for nearly two millennia (cf. Ezek. 27). Both David and Solomon were allied to the Phoenicians, resulting in a Phoenician designed and constructed temple in Jerusalem and a Red Sea port at Elath for Phoenician merchants (1 Kings 7:13–22; 9:26–28). During the period of the divided monarchy, King Ahab of Israel married the Phoeni-

cian princess Jezebel. This resulted in the importation of the religion of **Baal** Melqart into the political and religious life of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 16:29–34).

The Arameans occupied the inland regions of Syro-Phoenicia during Old Testament times. They were descendants of the Amorites and Hurrians and settled at the large oasis of Damascus in Aram, or Syria. The Arameans shared a border with Israel and were alternately enemies or allies of the Israelites, depending on the menacing power and presence of Assyria. Two other important centers of civilization were located in Syro-Phoenicia: the city-states of Ebla (ca. 2500 BC) in the northern interior of Syria, and Ugarit (ca. 1500 BC) on the coast of Lebanon.

The region of Palestine, or Canaan, was the land of covenant promise for the Hebrews. However, the presence of the Philistines on the coast and the several Canaanite people groups inland meant Israel would not possess the land of Canaan without conflict. The incomplete conquest of Canaan under Joshua left the Hebrews prey to the seductive influence of Canaanite Baalism and its idolatry and immorality (Deut. 7:1–5; Josh. 13:1–7; Judg. 2:11–15). The Philistines controlled the coastal plains and remained a potent enemy of Israel right through the periods of united and divided monarchies, until King Uzziah (767–740 BC) subdued the Philistines (2 Chron. 26:6–15). The Hebrew prophets continued to pronounce judgment on the Philistine cities into the seventh and sixth centuries BC (e.g., Jer. 25:20; Zeph. 2:4–7; Zech. 9:5–7).

Bionet, Wikimedia Commons

Ancient Egyptian civilization developed around the Nile River. It was a key transportation and trading route and was also valuable because its yearly flood season would revitalize the land for agriculture with water and fresh soil. The result of this annual

inundation was that fertile ground lined the Nile on both sides and then abruptly shifted to desert where the flood waters did not reach. Agriculture was therefore limited to a very narrow strip of land.

Peter White

The Judean Wilderness stretches from the general vicinity of Jerusalem east to the Dead Sea. Its dry desolation forms a protective barrier for the inhabitants of Judah against any would-be adversaries from the east.

Egypt

The land of Egypt lay immediately to the southwest of Palestine and has been known since ancient times as "the gift of the Nile." The Nile River was considered a god by the Egyptians because all life was dependent on the flow of this great watercourse. The final 750 miles of the Nile River bisected the area known as Egypt in antiquity. The river valley was hemmed in by limestone cliffs on the east and desert on the west. The strip of arable land in the river basin measured from 25 miles to nearly 150 miles in width at the delta. The land of Egypt receives up to eight inches of rainfall annually, with large portions experiencing less than one inch. Agricultural activity was based totally on irrigation of the rich alluvial soil deposited along the river basin as a result of the annual flooding.

Ancient Egypt was divided into an Upper Kingdom (along the narrow strip of river valley in the south) and a Lower Kingdom (essentially the delta area in the north). The predictable flood pattern of the Nile and the great natural barriers of mountains and desert on both the eastern and western borders made for a static Egyptian civilization. Historians often refer to the "splendid isolation" of Egypt. This enabled Egyptian civilization to develop a dependable agriculturally based economy, a stable governmental structure, and an ordered society.

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

The Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods of Egyptian history (ca. 3100–2100 BC) witnessed the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under the pharaoh. This early period was also the time of the building of the great pyramid tombs for the royal family. The Middle Kingdom (2133–1786 BC) and Second Intermediate Period (1786–1570) would have included Abram's sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20), the migration of Jacob and his family to Egypt (Gen. 45:16–47:12), and perhaps the oppression of the Hebrews as slaves (Exod. 1:1–14).

The New Kingdom (1570–1085 BC) witnessed the call of Moses as deliverer of the Hebrews and the exodus from Egyptian captivity (Exod. 3–13). By the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BC) Egypt gained control of Palestine under Rameses II, thanks in part to a treaty with the Hittites. Egyptian intervention in Palestine continued with Sheshonk I, who harbored Jeroboam as a political fugitive from Israel (1 Kings 11:40). Later he invaded Judah during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25–26). Thereafter Egypt remained an important and necessary ally of both the Hebrew divided kingdoms against the Mesopotamian imperial powers of Assyria and Babylonia.

Later Hebrew history witnessed considerable direct contact with the Egyptians as well. For example, King Solomon married a daughter of the pharaoh as part of a political alliance (1 Kings 3:1–2), and later King Josiah of Judah was killed by Pharaoh Necho in battle at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:28–30).

Todd Bolen/www.BiblePlaces.com

The Shephelah is hilly territory along the western side of Judah, forming a barrier between the cities of Judah and the Philistine Plain. The four valleys through the Shephelah were always inhabited by fortified towns in order to maintain control of the entire region and ensure the security of Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah.

Todd Bolen/www.BiblePlaces.com

The ruins at Tell Balatah are the ancient city of Shechem in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Shechem stood along a major juncture of routes running through the Samarian hills.

Egyptian influence can be seen elsewhere in the language and literature of the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament contains nearly fifty Egyptian "loan words," or vocabulary items directly borrowed from the Egyptian language (like *'abrek*, "bow the knee," Gen. 41:43 KJV). There are also the long-acknowledged parallels between Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom literature and love poetry (see chapters 20 and 21, "Hebrew Poetic and Wisdom Literature" and "Job").

Hebrew religion may have been compromised on at least two occasions by the pervasive influence of the **Apis** calf cult of Egypt, namely, the incident of Aaron and the golden calf related in Exodus 32 and Jeroboam's calf worship at Dan and Bethel related in 1 Kings 12. Hebrew statecraft was also influenced by the Egyptians, as the preexilic prophets condemned the Israelites for straying from God and seeking alliances with Egypt (Hos. 7:11). Curiously, Isaiah prophesied that Egypt would one day turn to the Lord and Yahweh would call them his people (Isa. 19:16–25).

The Arabian Peninsula

The Arabian peninsula is a massive, raised plateau. The land is essentially desert, sand dunes, and lava fields surrounded by somewhat fertile coastal fringes. The peninsula is usually divided into three geographical regions: (1) the northwestern area called Arabia of Petra, which includes Petra, Edom, Moab, and the Transjordan; (2) the Arabian desert in the northern and central areas; and (3) the southern coastal strip called Fortunate Arabia. The extensive desert of the Arabian peninsula formed a major physical boundary between the river valley civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. For this reason, travel from east to west in the ancient Near East moved in a north-south

direction along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to Haran and Damascus.

The Transjordan region of Arabia of Petra was home to several nation-states and semi-nomadic tribes that figured prominently in Israelite history. The Moabites and Ammonites were racially homogenous peoples who traced their lineage back to Abraham's nephew Lot and his incestuous relationship with his two daughters (Gen. 19:30–38). They were both monarchical nations, organized and governed by a form of tribal kingship.

It was the nations of Moab and Ammon that denied the Hebrews passage through the southern Transjordan on their way from Egypt to Canaan (Deut. 2:9–37). For this reason no Ammonite or Moabite was permitted to enter the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:3). Both nations were enemies to Israel during the days of the Judges right through the Hebrew united and divided kingdoms.

According to 2 Kings 24 and Jeremiah 37, Moab and Ammon aided the Babylonians in the sack of Jerusalem. Even more troublesome for the Hebrews were the gods of Ammon (Milcom or Molech, 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:10; Amos 5:23) and Moab (Chemosh, 1 Kings 11:7, 33). Perhaps the Moabite best known to us is the widow Ruth, who pledged allegiance to Yahweh (Ruth 1:16), and eventually found herself in the genealogy of King David (Ruth 4:13–22).

The Edomites lived to the south of Moab from the River Zered to the Gulf of Arabia. Their lineage may be traced to Jacob's older twin, Esau (Gen. 25:19–26). They were a rival nation to the Hebrews from the time of the exodus to the fall of Jerusalem. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah all pronounce **oracles** of doom against Edom, "a people always under the wrath of the Lord" (Mal. 1:2–4). (For more on the place of the Edomites in Old Testament history, see chapter 36, "Obadiah")

Two other groups of people roaming the northern Arabian peninsula bear mention. The first group, the Amalekites —like the Edomites descendants of Esau (Gen. 36:12, 16)—fought with Israel en route from Egypt to Canaan (Exod. 17:8–16) and were part of a coalition of foreign oppressors of Israel during the period of the Judges (e.g., Judg. 6:3; 7:12). Numbers 24:20 and Deuteronomy 25:17–19 predict the utter annihilation of the Amalekites for their unprovoked assault against Israel during the exodus. The second group, the semi-nomadic Midianites, were descendants of Abraham. They lived in the region of northern Arabia (Gen. 25:1–2, 18). In Habakkuk 3:7 the Cushites and Midianites seem to be equated, so these tribes must overlap in some way. Joseph was sold to the Egyptians by Midianite traders (Gen. 37:25–36), and Moses married into the Midianite clan of Jethro while exiled in Sinai (Exod. 2:15–22). During the period of the Judges the Midianites were among the foreign peoples oppressing the Hebrew tribes (Judg. 6:2; 7:2).

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

The Land of Palestine

The land of Palestine took its name from the Philistines (the Pelishtim in Hebrew) who settled along the Mediterranean coast from Joppa to Gaza about 1300–1200 BC. According to the Bible, the Philistine people were connected with Caphtor, usually associated with the island of Crete (Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). Prior to the Philistine migrations the region was known as Canaan. This term signified a "land of purple" and was probably derived from the purple dye manufactured by the indigenous peoples from the murex shellfish found in abundance along the Mediterranean coast.

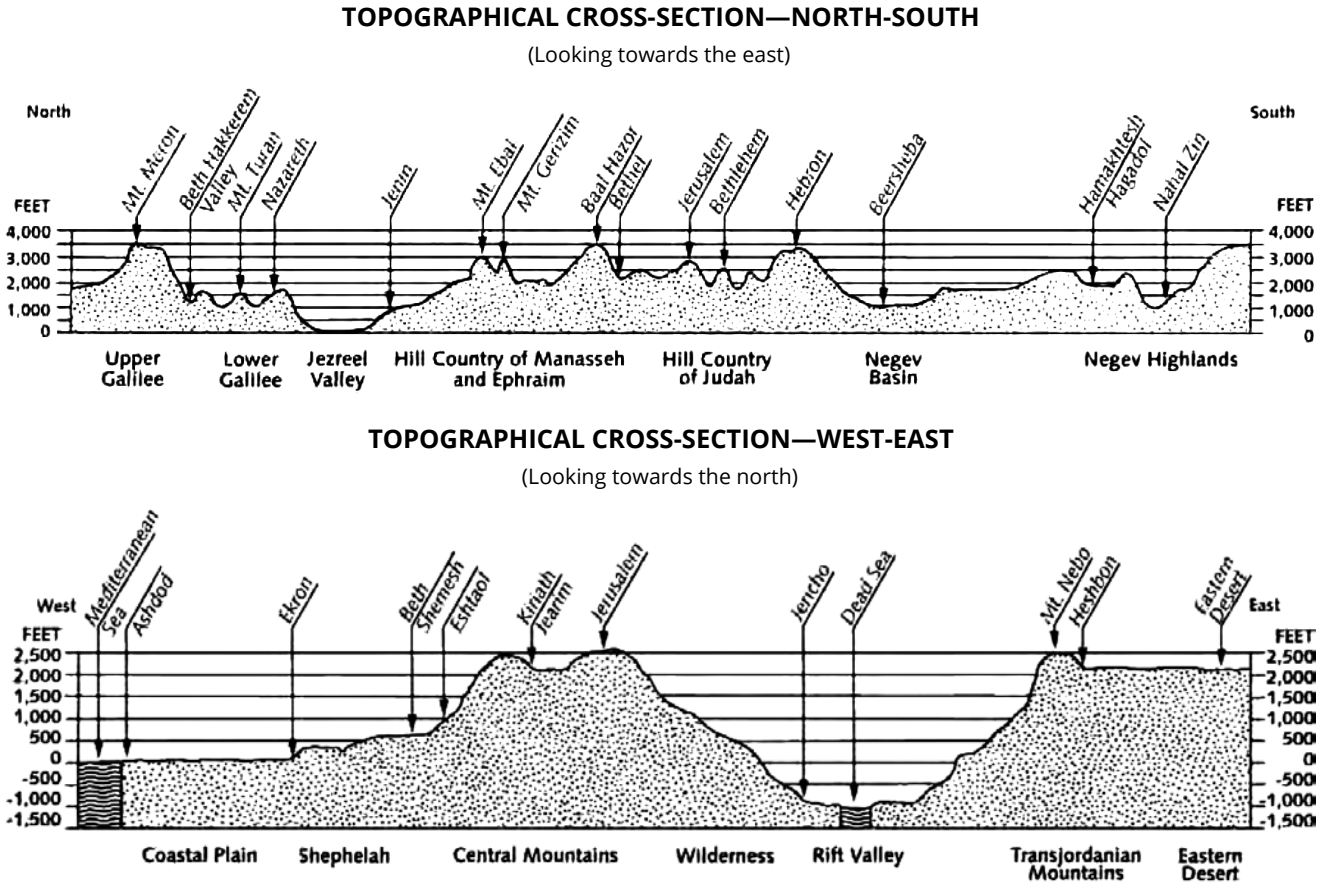

Figure 2.1. Geological Features of Palestine

Palestine is often referred to as the geographical and theological center of the ancient world. It was located at the crossroads of the important trade routes of antiquity, the "land between" the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. It was also in this general area that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all had their beginnings. The land area measures approximately 150 miles from Dan to Beersheba (north-south) and 100 miles from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River (east-west), or roughly the size of New Jersey. The climate is typical of the Near East, mild to cold winter depending on the altitude, with some snow at the higher elevations. The rainy season lasts from October to April, with hot, dry, cloudless summer months from May through August.

The land is easily divided into four basic longitudinal, or north-south, geographical regions: the coastal plain, the central hill country, the Jordan rift, and the Transjordan plateau (cf. Deut. 1:6–8). The major latitudinal or east-west geographical divisions of Palestine are connected both with the geographical features of the land and political bound-

aries of the Israelite divided kingdoms. These divisions included the region of Galilee in the north, Samaria in the north-central area of Palestine, Judah in the south-central portion of Palestine, the Negev (or "dry" **steppe**) in the south, and the Sinai peninsula forming a great natural barrier between Palestine and Egypt.

The Coastal Plain

The coastal plain gradually widens to distances of ten to twelve miles in southern Palestine. This fertile strip of land receives more than 30 inches of rainfall annually off the Mediterranean Sea. Three distinct plains are identified along the coast: Acre (Acco), extending northward from Mount Carmel (twenty-five miles long and five to eight miles wide); Sharon, between Mount Carmel and the port city of Joppa (fifty miles long and ten miles wide); and the plain of the Philistines in the extreme south from Joppa to Gaza. The coastal plain never held primary importance to the Hebrews geographically during Old Testament history. The Phoenicians controlled the northern plain, the Philistines controlled the southern plain, and the plain of Sharon was wasteland, marsh, and dense forest in ancient times.

The Central Hill Country

The region of the central hill country was the most varied geographically and the most important historically in Old Testament times. The majority of Israelite cities were located here, and the territory comprised the bulk of the land area controlled by the Hebrew united and divided monarchies. The mountainous terrain forms the spine, or backbone, of western Palestine and is commonly divided into three major geographical sections: Galilee, Samaria (or Ephraim), and Judah. The slopes reach heights of 3,000 to 3,300 feet; the region receives adequate rainfall and was suitable to the Hebrews for agricultural cultivation, including grains, vineyards, and fruit and olive groves.

Todd Bolen/www.BiblePlaces.com

The Jezreel Valley runs from the northwest to southeast, connecting the coastal plain to the Jordan Rift near Beth-shean. It was a common travel route and therefore became strategically important—and home to numerous conflicts.

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The Jordan River meanders like a serpent from the area of Mount Hermon in the north through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in the south of Palestine. If it traveled in a straight line, it would be only seventy miles long, but because of its many curves it actually measures two hundred miles.

The principal features of Galilee include Mount Tabor (Judg. 4:6, 12) and the Jezreel Valley. The city of Shechem, flanked by mounts Ebal and Gerizim dominated Samaria (Josh. 8:30–35). Jerusalem was prominently situated at the crossing of the trade routes in Judah (2 Sam. 5:6–12). The strip of land between the coastal plain in the south and the central highlands was known as the Shephelah. This broad and fertile piedmont (or plateau between coast and mountains) was a forested area in Old Testament times and occupied by the Philistines (cf. Judg. 14–15; 1 Sam. 17). During the days of the Judahite monarchy, Beth-Shemesh and Lachish were important fortifications along the southwestern flank of Judah (2 Chron. 25:17–28).

The Jordan Rift

The Jordan River rift, or Jordan cleft, is a great geological depression that begins in Syria in the Lebanon mountains and runs south to the Gulf of Aqabah and the Red Sea. The Jordan River valley that forms the eastern boundary of Palestine is also part of this jagged geological trench.

The Jordan River has its origins on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon and rises from three spring-fed rivulets. The Jordan flows southward from Hermon to the Hula Lake and swamp and then drops quickly some 900 feet and empties into the Sea of Galilee. This inland, freshwater lake is 650 feet below sea level and is surrounded by rounded hillocks. The lake itself is thirteen miles wide and seven miles long. The Jordan River then flows south from the Sea of Galilee winding its way to the great Salt or Dead Sea, nearly 1,300 feet below sea level—the lowest point on the face of the earth.

During antiquity the region around the Sea of Galilee was heavily populated and intensively cultivated by means of irrigation. Further south, the river valley narrowed and was covered with dense jungle-like vegetation, a habitat for wild animals in Old Testament times (Jer. 49:19; 50:44; Zech. 11:3). The southern end of the river valley was largely unpopulated, except where the Jabbok River entered the Jordan and at the spring-watered oasis of Jericho. Lined with slippery clay-mud hills and thick vegetation, the Jordan Valley still constitutes a natural barrier between Palestine and the Transjordan plateau.

The Dead Sea has no natural outlet, and its mineral-rich waters have a salt content of 30 percent. The limestone cliffs lining the western shore of the Dead Sea are pocked with caves that served as hideaways for bandits, political fugitives, and sectarian religious communities. It was here among the caves of this "badlands"-type landscape that the famous Dead Sea or Qumran community scrolls were found. South of the Dead Sea, the Arabah valley stretches some hundred miles to the Gulf of Aqabah. The inhabitants of this desolate and dry desert fringe mined the iron and copper deposits found in the hills bordering the Arabah, or engaged in the caravan trade that transversed the region.

The Transjordan Plateau

Broadly speaking, the Transjordan plateau is an extensive tableland rising some 2,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level between the Jordan River and the northernmost reaches of the Arabian desert. The region yields some minerals and is suitable for both agricultural and pastoral lifestyles. Four major **wadis** or rivers feed the Jordan River from the plateau, including the Yarmuk, Jabbok, Arnon, and the Zered.

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Hebron lies about 25 miles south of Jerusalem along the important Ridge Route, which links the cities in the hill country. It was an important commercial and military location and also the city where David began his reign as king (2 Sam. 2:11).

Lepsius *Denkmaler*

Merchant trade between Canaan and Egypt was common as early 2000 BC. This drawing reproduces a painting from the tomb of Beni Hassan from about the time of Abraham and shows Asiatic (Semitic) merchants bringing their goods to Egypt.

The Transjordan tableland may be subdivided into three main plateaus: the Seir mountain plateau in the south (from the Gulf of Elath to the Zered River), the area of Moab and Gilead in the central Transjordan (extending from the Zered to the Yarmuk rivers), and the Bashan plateau in the north (stretching from the Yarmuk to Dan). The "king's highway ran the length of the Transjordan plateau from Bozrah to Damascus.

The Seir plateau is the most rugged of the three, with mountain peaks rising to nearly 6,000 feet. It was here the Edomites and later the Nabateans built their cities amid the rock cliffs. Moab and Gilead contained fertile soil for cultivation and extensive tracts of grazing land for animal herds. Forest remnants can still be found in Gilead. The largest and most fertile of the plateaus was the region of Bashan. Here the tableland sits some 3,000 to 5,000 feet above sealevel, permitting adequate rainfall for agriculture. The rich volcanic soils of the plain of Bashan made it the best pastureland in the entire Levantine region of the eastern Mediterranean (Ps. 22:12; cf. Amos 4:1).

The Transjordan region was the first area settled by the Hebrews as part of the conquest of Palestine after the exodus from Egypt (Josh. 13:24–31). Throughout Old Testament history the plateau area was often the site of military conflict. The Hebrews, Arameans, Assyrians, Moabites, and Ammonites all vied for control of the trade route centers along the King's Highway and of the fruitful land of Gilead and Bashan, a most valuable commodity in the arid and desert-like environment of most of Near East.

The Trade Routes

Overland Routes

The prophet Ezekiel's description of Phoenician commerce in the first millennium BC confirms the strategic geographical location of Syro-Palestine (Ezek. 27:12–36). As the land bridge between Africa and Eurasia, Palestine played a prominent role in international trade as early as the third millennium BC.

There were two major international highways linking Mesopotamia and Egypt via Palestine. Both were very ancient routes, their history traceable back to the Early Bronze Age (3000–2100 BC). One was known as "the way of the sea" (or Via Maris in Roman times). The route originated at Qantir (Qantara) in the eastern delta of Lower Egypt, crossed the northern Sinai peninsula, turned north along the coast of the Negev and Judea, and then veered inland through Megiddo to the plain of Beth-Shan. Here the road divided, one artery branching off along the west shoreline of the Sea of Galilee to Dan and Damascus, the other continuing eastward through Bashan to Damascus. At that point the highway turned to the southeast, connecting Babylon and Ur.

The second important trade route was known as "the way of the kings." It too joined Babylon with Egypt, transversing the Sinai desert through Kadesh-Barnea and continuing into the Negev through Edom. The highway then jogged

to the north through the Transjordan area of Moab, Ammon, and Gilead to Damascus, and from there into Mesopotamia. King Jehoram identifies the southern portion of this route as "the way of the wilderness of Edom" (2 Kings. 3:8). Secondary roads branching off the King's Highway included a route from Kadesh-Barnea to Elath (perhaps the "way of the Red Sea" in Num. 14:25) and another route to Elath from Bozrah mentioned in the battle that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah waged against Kedorlaomer (Gen. 14:5–6).

A lesser trade route originated at Elath, extending to Babylon via the Arabian desert with stops at Dumah and Tema. There was also a route northward to Damascus from Dumah. Moreover, some twenty-three regional or local routes crisscrossed Palestine during biblical times (e.g., "the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea," Exod. 13:18; "the highway from Bethel to Shechem," Judg. 21:19; and "the way of the plain," 2 Sam. 18:23).

The Importance of the Trade Routes

Palestine's location as a corridor for commerce between three continents had great significance for the Israelites. Politically the location made the Hebrews vulnerable to hostile invasion by foreign powers seeking to control the land bridge for military and economic reasons. This forced Israel to engage in international diplomacy, including forging alliances with surrounding pagan powers. On this account Hosea the prophet rebuked the northern kingdom of Israel (Hos. 7:10–11). In their pride and self-sufficiency the Hebrews sought political treaties with Egypt and Assyria, refusing to seek help from the Lord. Of course, this type of political maneuvering was useless. The Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and later the Greeks and Romans all took their turn overrunning Palestine as part of the military expansion of their empires.

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

The crucial location of Palestine also had implications for the Israelites socially, economically, and religiously. Trade and commerce fostered the development of a merchant class. Soon the rich were able to gain control of the institutions of society and oppress the poor, breaking down covenant community (and equality before God). Economically the prosperity and wealth associated with those engaged in merchandising encouraged a crass materialism. Naturally, the emphasis on trade and commerce led to Sabbath violations. All this gave rise to pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency, and a false sense of security. Yahweh seemed irrelevant.

The cosmopolitan nature of Syro-Palestine also led to intermarriage between Hebrews and foreign neighbors. This encouraged the **syncretism** of Hebrew religion with the cults of Baal, Chemosh, Milcom, and so on—not separation, uniqueness, and holiness God required of his **elect**. Ultimately it was this "religious pluralism" that led to the overthrow of the Hebrew kingdoms and exile in Assyria and Babylonia (cf. Hos. 4 and Amos 3).

Theological Significance of the Land

Palestine, or the land of Canaan, is also an important theological symbol in the Old Testament. This real estate was a major component in God's initial covenant promise to Abram (Gen. 12:1–3) and is the goal or destination of the Pentateuchal narratives. The exodus from Egypt was divine deliverance for the purpose of bringing the Israelites into "a good and spacious land, ... flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8). The land of Canaan was both the goal of covenant obedience before Yahweh and the reward for maintaining his covenant stipulations.

The Hebrew possession of the land of Palestine signaled the displacement of the indigenous Canaanites. The Hebrew conquest under Joshua was "holy war" against the Canaanites. The Old Testament considers the onslaught just punishment meted out by God through theocratic Israel for the gross sin associated with the fertility cult of Baal and Asherah. The Canaanites had defiled the land, and by purging the land of Canaanite presence, the Hebrews themselves were cleansed (Lev. 18:24–30).

Because it was part of God's covenant promise, the land was integrally involved with the Hebrews' covenant relationship with Yahweh. The Ebal ceremony outlined in Deuteronomy 27 and enacted in Joshua 8 formalized the ties between the Hebrews, the Law of Yahweh, and the land of the promise. All three were inextricably bound together under Yahweh's sovereign rule. This meant God's presence and blessing overshadowed Israel as they obeyed the covenant stipulations (Deut. 28:1–14). It also meant that any Israelite trespass of the covenant defiled the land and jeopardized their claim to possess it (Deut. 28:15–68). Practicing the "abominations" of the Canaanites would eventually result in the forfeiture of the land; the land would "vomit" them out as it had the Canaanites (Lev. 18:24–25). Sadly, all this came to pass as a result of the policies and practices instituted by King Manasseh (2 Kings 21:10–15; 24:3). In fact, the length of Israel's exile from the land was directly associated with the concept of sabbatical rest for the covenant land (2 Chron 36:21; see also chapter 6, "Leviticus").

The Old Testament prophets and poets reminded Israel that possession of the land guaranteed neither God's presence nor his blessing (Jer. 7:1–7). The whole earth belongs to the Lord (Ps. 24:1), and he transcends the "land" in that the earth is but his footstool (Isa. 66:1). By the same token, exile from the land of the promise did not necessarily signify God's abandonment, as Ezekiel's chariot vision testifies (Ezek. 1). The throne of Yahweh is movable, and he is capable of seeing and responding to the needs of Israel in any location.

Nehemiah lamented the hollowness of possessing the land of the promise as slaves to foreign powers because of sin and covenant unfaithfulness (Neh. 9:32–37). He understood that right relationship to the land of covenant promise was rooted in right relationship to God in covenant faithfulness.

Finally, even the language and literary images of the Old Testament were influenced by the geography of the land of the promise. Psalm 23 abounds with the imagery of the land, and elsewhere the psalmist likened the righteous to trees planted by flowing waters (Ps. 1:3). The premium on water in the arid climate of the Near East conditioned the

language of the prophets as well as the psalmists. The rain and dew are often symbols of God's blessing and vindication (e.g., Joel 2:23; 3:18). Likewise, even the epithets for God such as "Rock, Fortress" and "Refuge" were probably inspired by the rugged and boulder-strewn terrain of the Sinai desert and Judean wilderness (Deut. 32:15). Even the reference to Canaan as a land "flowing with milk and honey" pictured the richness of the land for supporting the lifestyles of pastoralism (i.e., the "milk" of flocks and herds) and agriculture (i.e., the "honey," or nectar of crops and produce).

Questions for Further Study and Discussion

1. Why is a knowledge of geography important to the study of the Old Testament?

2. In what ways did the geography of the ancient Near East influence the history of Israel?

3. What was the theological significance of the land of Canaan for the Hebrews?

4. How was life in Palestine different for the Hebrews from their life as captives in Egypt?

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PART II
THE PENTATEUCH